

When You Don't Know What to Say

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I have a book in my library entitled, "What to Say & How to Say it, for All Occasions." It is full of many helpful hints for public speaking. Included are examples for introducing someone, opening a speech, accepting a nomination, making appeals for donations, giving testimonials, and so on. However, the book falls very short in addressing many critical situations in life.

There are no hints on what to say to the woman who has just been widowed. There is nothing about what to say to the parents of child who just been killed. There are no words for speaking to a family watching a loved one slowly and painfully pass away in a hospital room. There are no words for the victim of marital infidelity. Still, its title boldly claims, "What to Say & How to Say it for **ALL** Occasions."

The reality is, there are many times and situations when we don't know what to say, and that is probably good. Sometimes in the midst of life's difficult situations, not saying anything at all would be better than saying the wrong thing. How many times have we all been guilty of saying something painfully insensitive or completely inappropriate? A silent reassuring presence is often more comforting than all the words you might think to speak. A hand to hold, a tear stained eye, or shoulder to cry on can be much more effective than the infamous, "Everything is going to be OK.." or "I understand." In any given situation, chances are very good that you do not understand, so don't say you do.

After hearing of Job's sudden tragedies, his friends arrived on the scene, no doubt to offer words of comfort and reassurance.

Now when Job's three friends heard of all this adversity that had come upon him, they came each one from his own place, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite; and they made an appointment together to come to sympathize with him and comfort him (Job 2:11).

His friends come ready to help, ready to assist, ready to offer words of comfort. However, what they see leaves them speechless.

When they lifted up their eyes at a distance and did not recognize him, they raised their voices and wept. And each of them tore his robe and they threw dust over their heads toward the sky. Then

they sat down on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights with no one speaking a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great (Job 2:12–13).

For seven days and seven nights they sat without saying a word. Eventually they spoke, but as it turned out, it would have been better for them to remain silent. What would any of us have said to Job, “Everything is going to be O.K.?” or “I understand”?

Solomon said it well, there is “A time to be silent and a time to speak” (Ecc. 3:7b). Wisdom will help us better distinguish between those times of silence and speaking. Certainly, kind and encouraging words can be effective in providing comfort, providing you know when, where, and how to say them. The book of Proverbs describes the healing benefits of the right words.

Anxiety in a man’s heart weighs it down, But a good word makes it glad (Proverbs 12:25).

A man has joy in an apt answer, And how delightful is a timely word! (Proverbs 15:23).

Pleasant words are a honeycomb, Sweet to the soul and healing to the bones (Proverbs 16:24).

Like apples of gold in settings of silver Is a word spoken in right circumstances (Proverbs 25:11).

The right words, spoken at the right time and in the right way, can accomplish much good. It is knowing the right words and the right time, that is the challenge. If you are unsure, be a silent, but present comforter. You will say so much more.

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